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SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly VIII (February 3-February 10)

[1](#)1. This is the eighth in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19, 2006 presidential elections.

Signatures and Registration

[1](#)2. Grodno Commissions Reject Milinkevich's Signatures

On February 6, the Grodno district election commissions invalidated signatures collected in support of 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich from 10 of its 17 districts. [Note: According to the regulations, if the commissions find that 15 percent of signatures from a city or district are invalid, then all the signatures from that city or district are discarded.] Milinkevich's campaign team views the decision to invalidate signatures from those regions as an attempt to discredit Milinkevich and is prepared to produce photocopies of signature lists if the invalidation results in Milinkevich's exclusion from the presidential race.

[1](#)3. Candidates To Be Announced Around President's Day Weekend

On February 8, the Central Election Commission (CEC) announced plans to hold a special meeting on either February 17 or 21 at the Palace of the Republic to distribute the presidential candidates' registration certificates. CEC head Yermoshina said presidential incumbent Lukashenko will attend the meeting to accept his registration.

The Candidates

[1](#)4. Kozulin and Milinkevich Put Unification Talks on Hold

On February 8, Milinkevich rescinded his offer to discuss uniting forces with opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. On February 4, Milinkevich sent Kozulin a letter suggesting that the weaker candidate withdraw from the race before the presidential candidates were announced and unite forces with the stronger candidate. Milinkevich proposed numerous criteria to determine who was the stronger candidate, including current popularity ratings, level of recognition by the international community, the number of nomination signatures gathered and the existence of campaign teams in the regions. [Note: These criteria clearly favor Milinkevich to be named as the stronger candidate.] In a statement on February 6, Kozulin rejected the proposal, calling it an ultimatum, and suggested uniting forces

in the event one of the opposition candidates is denied access to the ballot.

15. Milinkevich in Moscow for Russian-Belarusian Conference

On February 6, Milinkevich and several members of his campaign team traveled to Moscow to participate in a conference on Russian-Belarusian relations. In his interviews with Ekho Moskvyy and Radio Free Europe/Radio Europe, Milinkevich stressed he is a pro-Belarusian politician, not a pro-Western or pro-Polish one, and that he is always open to dialogue with Moscow. He told reporters, "An anti-Russian politician cannot win any elections in Belarus, that is why Moscow has no grounds to be afraid of the pro-democratic forces." Kozulin also attended the conference, but without a team of advisors.

16. Voitovich Will Not Back Kozulin

On February 6, former presidential hopeful Aleksandr Voitovich refused Kozulin's offer to join forces. Instead, Voitovich will focus his efforts on a campaign seeking Lukashenko's withdrawal from the race. Voitovich told Belapan, "I express my solidarity with and support all steps to explain why Lukashenko's decision to run for reelection is illegitimate and to inform the public about the situation in the country."

The Campaign

17. Candidates Allowed to Campaign on State Media Only

On February 8, the central election commission (CEC) laid out the rules for campaigning on state media. Each candidate will receive two 30-minute segments on state media and coverage of their platforms in seven state newspapers. Candidates can broadcast free of charge two pre-recorded addresses on state First National Television Channel between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. and two messages on First National Radio Channel between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. The CEC will review the content of all speeches before their broadcast. A lottery will determine which time slots each candidate receives. In addition, candidates can publish a platform of 10,000 characters or less in seven nationwide state newspapers. CEC head Lidiya Yermoshina warned the non-state press that giving any presidential candidate an opportunity to publish articles in their newspapers will be considered illegal financial support.

18. Subsidized Heat and Water for All During Election Years

On February 8, in an apparent election ploy the Council of Ministers announced that the government will subsidize heat and hot water bills for the month of January. Utility consumption rose significantly in January due to a prolonged cold snap, with temperatures dipping to -30C. Consumers, however, are only required to pay utility companies for the same amount of heat and hot water they consumed in December. The Council of Minister ordered the local governments to provide funds for the utility companies to compensate for the loss. The money will come out of the national budgetary fund for the support of the country's regions, districts, and cities. Econoff noted that announcements stating that the GOB will subsidize tenets' January heating bills were displayed in his apartment building.

Observation Missions

19. CIS Releases First Election Observations

After conducting a weeklong trip around the country monitoring the work of election commissions, the CIS observation team released its first assessment of the progress of the election in Belarus on February 7. The statement noted that the election process has been conducted "in a quiet atmosphere, and in line with current law." The CIS did admit, however, that political parties, and especially parties who are not pro-government, were underrepresented in the commissions. Without

citing specific people or groups, the CIS also reported several violations during signature collection phase. CIS observers started their second tour of Belarus on February 7.

¶10. OSCE/ODIHR Begins Observation Mission in Minsk

On February 6, core team of election observation experts from OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) arrived in Minsk. The OSCE decided to launch an observation mission after an OSCE Needs Assessment Mission determined that the "election preparations are taking place against a background of increased constraints on civil society, independent media, and opposition political parties." ODIHR plan to field 40 long-term observers and 400 short-term observers. On February 9, Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Valery Romashko urged ODIHR to monitor the elections in strict accordance with Belarusian regulations. This warning followed an earlier MFA statement encouraging objective and unbiased conclusions from the ODIHR mission.

¶11. National Assembly Invites Its Counterparts to Observe

On February 6, the National Assembly announced that it invited representatives from several parliamentary bodies to observe the presidential elections, including the Parliamentary Assemblies from the Belarusian-Russian Union State and the OSCE, and the Inter-Parliamentary Assemblies from the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Community.

Party Activists

¶12. Officer Disciplined for Illegally Seizing Activist's Equipment

On February 9, a rank and file police officer Dmitry Rogolevich received disciplinary action for illegally seizing equipment from the home of a Belarusian Popular Front member Telman Maslyukov in December 2005. Out of the six officers who participated in the seizure of Maslyukov's photocopier, computer discs, books, pamphlets and newspapers, only Rogolevich was punished for violating the Criminal Procedure Code.

¶13. "Lukamol" Leader Works on Behalf of Opposition Presidential Candidate

On February 4, Venedikt Klyauzze, the secretary of a university chapter of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), gave an interview with daily newspaper "Komsomolskaya Pravda" about the consequences he faces for collecting nomination signatures in support of 10+ Coalition candidate Milinkevich. [Note: BRSM is a pro-Lukashenko, state-sponsored youth group, claiming to represent more than 300,000 members nationwide.] Klyauzze fears that both BRSM and the Belarus Agrarian and Technical University will expel him. He has already received failing marks on his exams after his support of Milinkevich was made public. In his defense, Klyauzze said he was a conscientious BRSM member who has always fulfilled his obligations and that "what he does in his free time is his own business."

Quote of the Week

¶14. In an interview with weekly newspaper "Obozrevatel" on February 3, presidential hopeful Sergei Gaidukevich spoke about Lukashenko's certain victory in the elections and how he expects to finish in the race:

"I won't become president in 2006....Sergei Vasilyevich Gaidukevich will come in second [in the election] whether you like it or not."

PHLIPOT